Paint the Walls a Deeper Shade of Calm

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/6135439.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Hannibal (TV)
Relationship:	Will Graham/Hannibal Lecter
Characters:	Will Graham, Hannibal Lecter, Alana Bloom, Beverly Katz, Brian Zeller, Jimmy Price, Jack Crawford
Additional Tags:	Will is Weird, Will Graham Doesn't Need Help, OMC - Freeform, Doctors make the best friends, Breathing Exercises, Declarations Of Love, Chesapeake Ripper, Jack Being an Asshole, Zeller tries his best, Pedophilia is mentioned, loss of virginity is discussed, shakes and fries are amazing
Language:	English
Series:	Part 14 of Friendship is Not My Forte
Stats:	Published: 2016-02-29 Words: 9,105 Chapters: 1/1

Paint the Walls a Deeper Shade of Calm

by Azure_K_Mello

Summary

In following Mort’s advice, Will finds some inner peace. But the outside world can intrude, social interactions and the Ripper make balance a little harder.

Will woke slowly, with Buster asleep on his face. He lifted the small dog off to cuddle him. All the dogs were against him. The queen bed was covered in warm, breathing beings and Will was happy. He breathed slowly, painting the wall in his head white even as Calvin breathed his gross dog breath in his face. He finished breathing and moved around his dogs, detangling himself from their legs. He patted them all and said, "Boys, it's time to face the day." They didn't heed him and Will went into the kitchen where he shook their kibble bag to call them, except it wasn't actually a kibble morning, he just used it as a dinner bell.

He got homemade dog food out of the fridge as his cell phone rang. He braced himself for Jack but smiled when he saw Hannibal's name. He answered saying, "I promise I'll change the sheets before you come home, but it felt really good to sleep with seven dogs."

"Unsanitary," said Hannibal. "I'm having lunch with Abigail, I have a lot of leftover chicken. I thought I would make stew."

"Sounds great. I'm going to disassemble the guestroom bed, if you'll be home early enough. I need help getting the guest bed to the basement and mine upstairs. I could make Beverly help as payback for the coffee but that's mean." He served the dogs and poured himself a bowl of cereal.

Hannibal laughed, "I'll help, just strip the dog sheets off your mattress before tonight."

Will said, "Promise. I need to put the phone down to make coffee."

"That's important. I'll see you around seven."

"Have a good day," said Will picking up the coffee.

"You too; I'm glad things worked out last night."

"Thanks, I feel good."

"Good, and tonight, we'll discuss your birthday."

"What about it?" asked Will. "It's a Friday. Do you have to work late? Or, if you're free, we could maybe go to the opera, if you have the box. But, my birthday has never been a big deal so I don't mind if you work."

"I was think about a dinner party," said Hannibal.

"You can have a dinner party if you like; I'll go fishing and hang out with my boys," said Will, putting the water on to boil even though he hadn't ground the beans yet. He really didn't mind. His birthday had never been a big thing. His dad had always treated it special but there hadn't been money for a party or anything and his brothers had always used the day to remind Will that he'd killed their mother. It didn't bother him to be alone because he knew Hannibal liked him and it was simply unfortunate that his birthday fell on a Friday.

“No, Will, a dinner party for you,” Hannibal said and Will could hear exasperation in his voice.

But he still felt lost, “I don’t know if we’ve ever met: I’m the person who avoids parties,” he kept his tone joking but he wasn’t going to a dinner party, no matter what Hannibal said. “If you care about me, you’re about to say that my birthday present is that I don’t have to go to my dinner party.”

“A dinner party with your friends, at your house, no suits, no waiters, no booze, just six or seven courses of recognizable protein cooked perfectly.”

“I don’t think I have enough friends for that,” said Will.

“I’ve told you before, dinner parties aren’t about numbers. JT needs to come up so that he and Abigail can meet with a lawyer to discuss something she told him, that’s going to be on the Thursday. So it could be six people: Abigail, JT, Alana, you, me and Beverly Katz. But we could also just have dinner, you and I or we could go to the opera. I don’t have the box but I could trade for it. We’ll discuss it tonight?”

“Okay,” agreed Will. “I’ll think about it.” He hung up and ground the beans, Calvin climbing his leg. He ate his cereal and drank his coffee standing by the sink, looking out the window and watching the dogs eat. He let them out and showered and whistled for them when he was dressed. He walked over to his office early even though he didn’t have a class until eleven. Instead he first wrote out the notebook for Mort. It was a nice leather journal that he dad had given him for Christmas a couple of years before. It had seemed too good to use. But it fit the need so perfectly. He wrote it all out, his breathing, his tricks, his schedule and then moved on to working on the monograph on ligature marks. He wrote, pausing only to look things up, his memory was failing him. He knew a lot of facts but couldn’t remember where he read them. He needed to know for citations. He had ninety pages of writing and seventeen pages of citations.

He went to class with confidence. He was happy and had a bounce in his step. He texted Beverly and said, “Lunch in the cafeteria or Checkers?”

“Checkers,” she texted back. “1 PM?”

“Sounds good,” he texted. He went into his lecture hall and spoke about nothing but ligature marks, fresh on his mind and with all the right citations. It was interesting and he’d made a slide deck, two years ago, that he supplemented with his talk. He felt good, he set reading and some questions for written work. He went back to his office and breathed, focusing on his lunch time breathing. As he finished there was a knock at his door. He glanced at the clock and called, “Come in.”

Beverly opened the door and said, “I have forty-five minutes, get a move on.”

He checked his pocket for his wallet and said, “Ready.” He locked the office behind him and said, “I want a shake.” He followed Beverly out to her car and told her about her his work then said, “Anything not brutally depressing about the Blue kid?”

“Nope, but Zeller is being nice. It’s actually sort of creepy.” They pulled into the lot and Beverly asked, “Are you up to eating inside or do you stay in the car?”

“I eat in restaurants,” said Will, “but thank you for checking.”

They parked and Beverly said, “I want the Big Chicken Sandwich.”

“I want a banana shake and fries,” Will replied.

Inside he placed the order and paid before Beverly could get her wallet, “You keep paying,” she said.

Nodding and sitting he said, “We need to talk about something and I don’t want you to be pissed so I figured I’d buy lunch.”

“Okay, I’m braced,” she said.

“My boyfriend wants me to have a dinner party for my birthday.”

“Boyfriend?” she repeated.

“Yeah.”

“So when I appreciated how good you looked in a suit and you said that my mind shouldn’t go there?"

He shrugged, “A lot of women don’t take, ‘gay’ for an answer. They decide it’s a challenge. But ninety-five percent of women accept, ‘No means no.’ Sorry, I wasn’t sure if we were friends at the time.”

She nodded, “And you think I would be pissed at not being told?”

“No, pissed that I didn’t tell you after we were confirmed as friends because I worried about discretion. Jack’s been an ass about it. I don’t want to hear what Zeller or Jimmy thinks. And I wasn’t sure if you would tell them.”

She thought about it, “Yeah, that’s a little dickish. Dinner party? Is your boyfriend an internet thing? You’d cut off your own face before willingly attend a dinner party.”

“Right?” he nodded. “But he promised it wasn’t a real dinner party: no one but my friends, no suits, my house, no pretentions. I think it could be fun. It’s fine if you don’t want to come, you don’t really know anyone, you might not feel like making conversations.”

“You hate social interactions so much you think of excuses for other people,” said Beverly, raising an eyebrow.

“Yes.”

“I like parties, even small ones, who will be there?”

“My friend JT, Hannibal, Alana Bloom, Abigail Hobbs, you and me.”

“So JT’s the boyfriend.”

“No, JT’s a friend out of New Orleans. In fact, if you are into one-night stands, you could totally go home with him. If you’re nice, funny, consenting and into it, he’ll go home with pretty much any woman… but he might have a girlfriend right now. In fact, he sent Hannibal a recipe from his girlfriend… maybe he’s not doing casual, borderline anonymous sex right now. He’s writing a book with Abigail and he’s having an in person meeting with her so he’ll be in town.”

The number of their order got called and Will got up to grab it. When he sat back down Beverly said, “So, you’re dating Hannibal and when he said he was staying later to walk the dogs he was totally bullshitting me.”

“Yes,” he agreed taking the lid off his shake and dipping fries in.

“You buried the lede,” said Beverly.

“You think my dating Hannibal is more interesting than the fact that someone is trying to make me go to a dinner party? I don’t attend dinner parties. The only other time six people have been in my house at once, my dad was here and I still almost hyperventilated. And that one wasn’t even in my honor; I’m going to be the center of attention. I feel nauseous just thinking about it.”

“No, I don’t think your dating Hannibal is more interesting than your attending a dinner party,” she unwrapped her sandwich. “But I think my getting invited to a Hannibal Lecter dinner party is more interesting than your being gay.”

He laughed and said, “It’s not a Hannibal Lecter dinner party. There are no waiters, it’s six people to a six or seven course dinner, no black tie, no pretentions, no bizarre meats, no cocktails. Hannibal wants the party to be like a bespoke suit: expensive, fitted to a T and comfortable.”

“Is Abigail going to be okay with me there? I was in her house.”

“I shot her dad and she’s moving in with me,” Will pointed out. “Don’t be Special Agent Katz. Be my friend Beverly.”

“People outside of work call me Bev, it’s only professionally that I go by Beverly.”

“So, be my friend Bev. This is my friends in my house, and she’ll be fine.”

“She’s moving in with you?” asked Beverly.

“Yeah, I’m redoing my bedroom for her and moving upstairs. I’m actually moving the guest bed to my basement tonight. I have to take it apart after class. Try to keep Jack from pulling me in. Hannibal is making a chicken stew and I have quiet plans.”

“You eat like a king all the time, don’t you?”

“Hannibal had his late night for patients last night so I got to eat Hot Pockets for dinner. And if I’m stressed out Hannibal will eat comfort food. I’m never sure if he’s being honest or just nice when he says he likes it. I’d never get him to come here.”

“Well, no, watching you eat fries dipped in milkshake is almost too gross for me,” said Beverly. “Why no cocktails?”

“I don’t drink, usually, and Hannibal wants me to be at my most relaxed. I have no tolerance. If there’s wine pairings I’ll be drunk and worried about everyone getting home. He wants me to be totally comfortable. There might be an open bottle of wine but all of his drink pairings are going to be non-alcoholic. You heard me on the phone with the cop in New Orleans: Graham men shouldn’t drink. I also understand if you want to give it a miss for that.”

“Will, stop with the excuses. If I’m invited, I’m coming.”

“You’re invited, next Friday.”

“Awesome, I’m there.”

“I don’t want a gift either, I already feel sick at the idea of a party.”

She sighed, “It’s not your first birthday, Will. It’ll be fine. It’s just friends.”

“It is my first birthday party,” Will corrected.

Beverly blinked, “You never had one when you were little?”

Will shook his head, “No money for it. Besides, it was also the anniversary of my mother’s death. She hemorrhaged while having me. My dad never held that against me but my brothers never forgave me. My birthday was never celebrated. Some friends in college took me out for dinner, but that’s it really.”

“Jesus, Will, that’s depressing.”

Shrugging he drained his milkshake, “It never mattered to me. That’s why this makes me feel sick. He’s making it way more important than it is.”

Beverly thought before speaking, mouth pursed for a moment, “He’s not going to be upset if you say no, if you say you’d be happier staying home alone with him and the dogs. If you really don’t want this, he’ll understand.”

“It could be fun. I liked the last one after the panic attack; I just have to accept that a panic attack is going to happen.”

“Okay, but if you want to say no, you can. If he cares about you, he won’t hold it against you.”

“It’ll be fun once I can breathe,” he said. She glanced at the clock on her phone and sighed heavily. He glanced at his and said, “Can you drop me at my house? I have to let the dogs out before class.”

“Sure,” she agreed and they gathered their trash.

He texted Hannibal as they walked out, “I talked to Beverly; pull the trigger on next Friday. Please don’t ask me to wear a suit.”

The text back said, “I care about you too much to ask you to dress up in your own home.”

Buckling his seatbelt he said, “Okay, dinner party is happening.”

“Were you waiting on me?”

Feeling uncomfortable he said, “I wanted to be sure you weren’t pissed. And for all his big talk about how dinner parties aren’t defined by size, I was hoping to make the guests even for Hannibal.”

“Life is really hard for you. It shouldn’t be this hard.”

He nodded, “Genetics suck. I don’t know what combination my parents had but they ended up with a loser, sociopath, psychopath and a neurologically atypical kid — in that order. How is it possible to have all four of your kids come out wrong?”

“You’re not wrong, just weird,” she corrected. “So what are your students learning at the moment?”

He explained the next two weeks of his curriculum to Beverly as they traveled and he appreciated how well she drove. He liked driving with her. She was good at it. She asked questions that he could answer and he was pleased to discover that he really was very comfortable around her. She felt like a friend, not just a person.

As they pulled up to his mailbox she said, “Here or the door?”

“The door would be perfect,” he said and she didn’t comment just went up the driveway to his porch.

“If we’re lucky we won’t see each other in the lab,” she said.

“Keep your fingers crossed,” he agreed before getting out. He patted the door twice once he was out and went up to the house. The dogs only gave him a cursory hello before rushing out to do their business. He felt guilty for not having time to take them for a walk but they played fetch for a while before he had to head to class. The noise of the construction didn’t bother him in the least. It didn’t grate or distress him. Jack never interrupted him and his two afternoon classes went well.

He went home happily and walked his dogs, avoiding the still noisy construction site, before changing his sheets and dismantling the guest bed. He carried the sides and footboard down to the basement but the box spring, mattress and headboard called for two sets of hands. He removed all the furniture and wrapped it in plastic tarps to go down to the basement. He would need them in the autumn to rake leaves but, hopefully, his dad’s house would be done by then. His basement was dry and didn’t smell but it was better to be safe than sorry.

He looked at the empty room upstairs, across from the bedroom. He usually only kept his out-of-season clothes in there but he could get a nice desk, a comfy chair and write monographs there. He would never bring a crime scene photo into his house but he could get a laptop. He'd have the internet when Abigail moved in and his monographs never scared him.

In the kitchen, he still had the color books he'd gotten for Abigail to pick from. He thought he might like colored paint in his new room, as long as it was pale and not patterned. Patterns stressed him out, in paint and wallpaper. He liked the pattern in the kitchen but that was the kitchen not his calm, quiet bedroom. His bedroom and living room were all the same dull blue-green color. He liked that and found it soothing. He was flipping through the book when he heard a knock at the side door. Looking up he smiled at Hannibal and stood to unlock it for him. Hannibal had his hands full with the stew pot.

Hannibal pecked him on the lips before putting the pot on the stove. "Dinner party?" he asked.

"Yes," said Will.

"Wonderful. How was your day?" He reached into the cupboard as he spoke, pulling out rice. Will liked that the man was so comfortable in his kitchen. He liked that Hannibal inhabited the space so easily as it meant that Will didn't have to go to his house.

"Really good," said Will. "How was yours?"

"Fine," said Hannibal, "Uneventful." He filled a pot with water and then seasoned it with a random mix of things Will didn't think went together before adding the rice.

"Mine too, that's what made it good. Beverly was fine with my dating you."

"Good," said Hannibal. "Otherwise she wouldn't be invited to dinner." Hannibal licked his lower lip and grimaced. "What did you eat for lunch?"

"A banana milkshake and seasoned fries." Hannibal shook his head with disappointment. "It was delicious."

"Food stamps," said Hannibal, as though reminding himself.

That made Will laugh and he went to the color book. "For the upstairs bedroom, what about the pale green and then the shade darker for the trim? I like it, but you share my room."

Hannibal stood behind him and wrapped an arm around his waist. He looked and said, "I approve. I always think darker woodwork is interesting. I thought you would like your room white. It's already white and you paint the wall in your mind white."

Will nodded, "And having white walls in my brain makes me feel more able to have color walls in real life."

"That's wonderful, as long as you want them and are choosing to do it. Don't paint them for me, the dogs or Abigail."

Will laughed, “For the dogs?”

“You treat them like they’re humans. I wouldn’t put it past you to paint for them.”

“It’s for me. I just wanted you to like the colors as you sleep here five nights a week. I’m also picking colors for my office, I’m picking those by myself because that’s supposed to be just my space. It will be like a panic room for emotions, instead of intruders. That’s my sanctuary if Abigail wants to watch her computer in the living room. I can tie flies or write in there. I might get a pull out couch for unexpected guests.”

“I like the colors for your bedroom. I’d like waking up to those colors five days a week. And I really like that you are going to have a private home office,” agreed Hannibal. “Is that bed ready to go into the basement?”

“Yes,” agreed Will. “I got most of it down myself.”

Hannibal smiled, “Let’s do that while the stew and rice cook.”

They headed up the stairs and Hannibal glanced at the empty room, “Was that always totally empty?”

“You didn’t look when you were up here during the snowstorm?” asked Will, surprised.

“I was never invited into this room; it wasn’t my place to look.”

“It’s always empty, but my off-season clothes are in the closet.”

Hannibal nodded. “The closet up here is more than twice as large that the one downstairs. I could leave a few things here if that is okay with you.”

“Of course you can.”

“I wouldn’t want to infringe on your personal space.”

“I like having you in my space,” Will said. “I really like having you in my space. I like having you here five nights a week.” Then, honestly, he said, “I don’t think I could cope with it being seven nights a week. But having your clothes and books and stuff here seven nights a week is great.”

That made Hannibal laugh, “I like having my house too. Those two nights a week I eat odd meat and drink lots of wine. I went hunting last night. I brought down a big animal.”

“What kind of animal?” asked Will.

“A bear,” said Hannibal. “They’re in season. I was willing to drive over an hour, talk with you for three hours and take two hours to convince you to go to sleep. So, understanding that I was willing to stay out of bed for six hours, I went hunting. It only took two and a half hours to bring him down but then I spent hours to butcher the carcass. Don’t worry, there won’t be a trace of it at the dinner party. I like you too much to serve bear. I got a nasty

scratch from the claws." He untucked his shirt and pealed back a dressing, exposing a nasty gouge on his side. It had been stitched cleanly.

"That looks like a Swiss army knife."

"I know, he only just caught me — only one claw actually got to me. I stitched it myself. Being a surgeon can sometimes be quite useful."

Will laughed and said, "Be careful lifting this that you don't hurt your wound. The evening will lose its charm if you pop a stitch." It was easy to get the parts down to the basement with two people. They sat down to dinner once the rice was ready. It was delicious, and Will felt happy. After dinner, they went for a walk with the dogs. The dogs were happy, Hannibal was smiling with his hand in Will's. It was nice and quiet. In bed, he reached for Hannibal and they made out. He was careful not to touch the mean wound as he curled into Hannibal and arched his back when the man stretched him open. "I feel like my skin is singing when you touch me, every change is a new note."

"I want to make you sing," said Hannibal. They kissed slowly as Hannibal moved inside of him. Later, Hannibal held him close and whispered, "Breathe and go to sleep."

Will relaxed and breathed, he said what had been great about his day and fell asleep easily. He woke up to the smell of frying eggs. Breathing slowly he got ready for the morning. He got out of bed and went into the kitchen, pouring coffee as Hannibal cooked. "Morning," he said.

"Morning," agreed Hannibal.

"How did you sleep?" asked Will.

"Very well, and you didn't so much as twitch," said Hannibal.

"No, no dreams. It was perfect," said Will. "I think it's a lot of things. In part it's having you close — I sleep better with you around; it's my monograph; it's not seeing Jack; it's Beverly being nice and saying I should call her Bev because friends call her Bev."

"I'm glad I can play a role in your sleeping well. I made High Life Eggs."

"Sounds good to me, thank you," said Will, pouring himself coffee. They sat down together and Calvin settled on Hannibal's feet. "Calvin," he said, reprimand in his tone and pointed to a spot next to him. The dog got up with a whine and settled next to Will.

"Thank you," said Hannibal.

"You can nudge them off, you know."

"Nudging is adjacent to kicking," Hannibal replied.

That made Will feel a warmth in his chest as he ate and drank his coffee. "Busy day today?"

"No, I'll be home early. I will have a small surprise."

“Is it a dog?” asked Will.

“No,” Hannibal said with a smile.

“Will it be a dog if I ask very nicely?” Will joked. Hannibal leaned over and kissed him and Will pulled back, “Sorry. I have coffee-morning breath.”

“I like kissing you,” said Hannibal. He smiled, “Sadly, I should get to work.”

“But you’ll be home early?” asked Will.

Hannibal nodded, stood and leaned in to kiss Will, “I have to go; have a good day.”

It was another quiet, good morning. He worked on his monograph, taught and never saw Jack. Alana came by at lunch, waiting in the back of his classroom until he dismissed his students, and said, when they had left the room, “Roast beef and potato salad?”

“How could I pass that up?” he asked. “It’s office hours, though.”

“I know,” said Alana, “I just wanted to see your face.” He pointed at his face and she smiled, “And have lunch.”

He packed his briefcase. “Sounds good. I have to do my lunch breathing but I can do that before my class.”

He led the way to his office and as she closed and relocked the door behind herself Alana said, “How is it going with Mort? You mentioned your breathing.”

“Really well,” said Will. Pulling out his leather notebook he said, “I’m keeping journal of all my exercises and schedule. He’s been helpful. He gave me advice on contextualizing fear that helped me a lot. I like him.”

“Am I derailing your exercise?” she asked as she pulled out Tupperware. “I don’t want to mess up a treatment plan. If I’m messing it up, tell me and I’ll leave the sandwich for you. The great part of having doctors for friends means we respect your treatment plan.”

“That’s very true. Hannibal never says good morning until I’ve finished breathing. But no, Alana, I’m not polite enough to be lying to you to spare your feelings. I do need fifteen minutes by myself before class. I promise I’ll throw you out if you overstay your welcome.” He unlocked the bottom drawer of his desk and removed an assorted six pack of different artisanal beers. “Thank you for keeping my students on track while I was out.”

“Will, you didn’t need to do this,” Alana grinned at him and started to read the labels. “You know I like consulting for the FBI, it’s interesting. You gave me tons of notice, they pay well. It’s never a chore.”

“I know,” agreed Will. “I’m still grateful.”

“This is a really cool gift, thank you,” She took lids off of her food containers and handed him one with a sandwich in it and one with potato salad and a fork.

“You are more than welcome,” he said. “And you’ll get a formal invite soon but I’m telling you now, you’re invited to my birthday dinner party next Friday. Hannibal is writing out calligraphy ones.”

“Hannibal is throwing you a dinner party with formal invites? Does he have a head injury?”

Will smiled, looking at his sandwich, not her. It was nice to have the sandwich to look at, talking about the man with her still made him slightly uncomfortable. He knew they were friends, they genuinely liked each other, but there was still that kiss in the back of his mind. “It’s a six people party. The three of us, Abigail, JT and Bev. He’s only writing four formal invites. It’s come as you are, no gifts, just come to my house and eat. Wear sweats if you like. He’s making a big deal out of it, please don’t.”

“Okay,” she said and out of the corner of his eye he saw the head nod, “No aggrandizing of the situation. Just a tasty dinner with nice people. I don’t think I know a Bev.”

“Beverly Katz,” said Will. “You’ve met her. She’s the second in command of the BAU.”

“Oh, I didn’t realize she wasn’t a ‘Beverly,’” explained Alana.

“Professionally she is, when we tell Jack Crawford we had car problems while secretly getting fast food, she is just Bev.”

“That’s wonderful. I know how hard making friends is for you. I didn’t know you were close.”

Nodding he said, “I didn’t either until recently. I liked her, I didn’t know she thought of me as a friend. Bev’s a really nice person.” His computer dinged with a question and he sighed before turning the monitor to her.

After reading it she said, “I really tried to teach them, Will.”

“I know you did,” he replied. He tied his response onehanded, eating potato salad. “This is really good potato salad.”

“I can’t take credit, it’s from the store. I bought too much, wanting to have lunch with you.”

“I’m glad you did,” he said. “So how are your students?”

They talked for another half hour while Will answered questions. Then Alana said, “I’ll leave you to your breathing. I’m glad Mort is good for you.” He handed her his empty Tupperware.

“Thank you for lunch, Alana, it was great.” She left with a smile.

Breathing slowly he focused on his day and what lay ahead. Feeling good he made plans when the door opened without a knock. “Office hours are digital only. Please shut the door.” He didn’t open his eyes.

“The Ripper struck,” said Jack’s voice.

Nodding, eyes still closed, Will said, “I need ten minutes. Either leave the address or wait outside.”

“Will,” said Jack sharply.

He winced but didn’t open his eyes, “You still have that card? Call my doctor or give me ten minutes without comment. Don’t ride me, ride him. I’m following orders.” The door slammed but Will ignored it. He refocused on his breath but changed his planning. When he opened his eyes, Will sent an email to his two afternoon classes canceling. He hated doing it but the Ripper took priority.

Opening the door he saw Jack and gave the man a small grim smile, “Where?”

“Garden of a monastery,” said Jack. They started to walk toward the parking lot.

“Jeez, Jack,” said Will. “Anything special about the victim?”

“He was accused of pedophilia about three years ago,” said Jack with a shrug, “he was cleared of all charges. Not many of the Ripper’s victims are bad people.”

“I was thinking of the man in the tree, wondering if the monastery was special, seems it might be.” Will shrugged.

“You religious, Will?”

“My mom was Creole and my dad is pure New Orleans born and bred: I was raised with cultural Catholicism. I feel I have a home in the church but I have no home in a god’s heart.” Will replied. “Are you?”

“The harder things become, the more I believe.”

Shrugging Will said, “Lots of people feel that way, as though God will make things better. But, if you believe in Him, didn’t He make it bad to begin with? To me, having faith is like being a child at Christmas: you believe that someone will take care of you ‘cause you’ve been good. Be good without a reason, Jack, be good believing that the only reason to be good is because it’s right. Then the world might have benefited and, if it turns out there is a God, well…”

“You might keep those thoughts to yourself in the monastery,” said Jack sounding pissed.

Will replayed his words and said, “I’m sorry. How is Bella?”

“Not good,” he said.

“I’m sorry, Jack,” Will said honestly.

Jack said nothing and they didn’t speak for the rest of the journey. At the monastery they followed uniformed cops to the scene where Jimmy Price and Beverly were already examining a very fat man who was crucified. He was missing everything below his knees. He was nailed through the wrists with his palms upward. One hand held his penis, the other his

testicles. His heart had been removed, strung onto string and hung around his neck. His chest was unblemished and Will rounded the body, he was the incisions in the corpse's back. They'd been stitched back together.

"What do you see, Will?" asked Jack.

"The Ripper believes this man was a heartless pedophile," he said. "It's not a subtle message. I wonder what other organs he's removed, what trophies."

"What does he do with his trophies?" asked Jack.

Will thought long and hard and then shook his head, "I think the Hobbs case taints me... But the organs he takes, the cuts of meat… He kills in sounders of three, he thinks of them as pigs." He sighed.

"Point, Will?"

"I think he really thinks of them as pigs. I think he eats them, I think he's shopping. I think he fills his freezer and when he runs low, then he refills it. He never takes scalps, digits, eyes. He never takes inedible organs. I think he eats them… but that could be Garret Jacob Hobbs informing my world view." He shrugged. "You won't find any forensics, you never do. It's not your fault. He's very good, very clean. Like the snake, he crawls in, does his damage and crawls back out but he never sheds a scrap of skin. All we see here is hatred. He loathes this man, he views him as less than human. And he hates monks. He left this here as a statement… find out if the monks run a school, youth outreach… whatever. This is related to childhood." Looking around he said, "Pretty monastery."

"Let's go back to the lab," said Jack.

Will didn't want to be with Jack anymore and he forced himself to make brief eye contact with Beverly. She got the message and said, "Will, ride with me? There's a creaking noise and I want you to listen."

"Sure," agreed Will. In her car he said, "Thank you."

"No problem," she said. "You looked panicked."

"I'd spent as much time alone with Jack as I can. He's a scary man," said Will.

"No problem," she repeated. "Can you search around and find either Doritos, a granola bar or candy? I'm starving. I skipped breakfast in favor of kickboxing." He found a granola bar in the glove compartment and opened it for her. "You are the best, thank you. You can have one too, if you like."

"Thanks, I know you guard your emergency food, but I had just had a full lunch when Jack came to my office."

"That's good, because we're not getting out for a while." Will didn't want that to be true.

He texted Hannibal, “I’ve been pulled in on the Ripper case. We have a new body. The dogs will be desperate to be let out because I expected to leave here at three.”

Hannibal texted back, “I’ll let them out. The surprise can wait. I’ll see you later. I’ll make you an omelet and grilled cheese if you’re late.”

He smiled at the phone and Beverly said, “Hannibal? No one smiles at their phone like that if it’s not the SO.”

“Do people still say SO?” asked Will.

“I just did,” said Beverly.

“Hannibal is a good person,” said Will.

“Can I have another?” asked Beverly, pointing at the glove compartment. Will got her another granola bar. “Thank you.”

“So, who is Willard Wiggins?” he asked, thinking he should finally learn this.

Will felt okay by the time they got to the lab and then he silently groaned seeing Zeller. Zeller was practically elbow deep in the man’s corpse. “Kidneys, liver, tongue and lungs were removed but the tongue was actually forced down his throat.”

Looking at the body and the photos from the scene Will said, “Hatred, so much hatred.”

Research about the pedophilia charges took over, as well as looking into the monks, and Jack had to run to a meeting. It was depressing and Beverly said, “Sex shouldn’t be sad. My boyfriend and I were sixteen and we both wanted it. Then, two years later I keyed his car when that manwhore cheated on me with Chrissy Phillips.”

“Oh, new game,” said Zeller. “Okay, I was seventeen, she was eighteen. She was friends with my older sister. We were both really, really drunk and she vomited in my bed.”

“I was twenty,” said Jimmy, “a sophomore, he was twenty-two, he was a senior in my orgo class. We dated for three and a half years and we broke up rather amicably but he said that it bothered him that he wasn’t the smart one in our relationship. He followed me to grad school, got a job by campus so we could stay together but it irritated him that I kept going with my education.”

Attention turned to Will and Beverly said, “Will, you don’t have to. We get horribly callous sometimes and overshare. It’s a hazard of the lab, but you don’t have to join in if you’re uncomfortable.”

Zeller said, “It’s really fine.” Looking at Zeller, Will knew that he was biting back a jab about Will being a virgin. The man still felt guilty about Daniel Blue.

“I was fifteen, he was thirty-one,” said Will and he saw three sets of eyes go very wide, very quickly. For Zeller and Jimmy is was probably the combination of the pronoun and age gap.

“It was consensual, I was quite grown up for my age. It was statutory rape, not pedophilia — it was consensual but highly illegal. He was the psychiatrist at my school.” Will shrugged.

Zeller studied him and then said, “If you were on food stamps how were you at a school fancy enough to have its own psychiatrist?” Will thought it was meant as an apology, an acknowledgement of the last time they were together and how Zeller had behaved so poorly.

Will studied the man and said, “You think I’m an asshole, don’t you? You think my curtness and my avoidance of eye contact, social contact, physical contact and conversation in general are all caused by the fact that I’m an asshole. My kindergarten teacher thought the same thing. She sent me to the principal to talk about my attitude problem because I told her to stop touching me when she wanted me to pay attention and she said if I didn’t want her to touch me I should look her in the eye. She used to turn my chin when she talked so I looked at her face. It made me feel nauseated and scared. I live on a knife edge of terror at all times. I did then and I do now. My motivating force in life is fear. The principal talked to me for maybe five minutes and called the Child Study Team and my dad. The principal’s son was autistic and he could tell I wasn’t just a dick. My dad always thought I was just a little weird. I never had a problem with physical contact or even most eye contact with him I was never scared when he was there. Three days later, doctor were oohing and ahhing over my unique fMRI and the shocking number of mirror neurons in my brain, and I was transferred to a school for kids on the spectrum. I was taught to shake hands trained not to have a panic attack when people bumped into me. Everywhere we went, we moved all over the country for my dad’s work, wherever we were, the state paid for me to go to specialized schools. I would have normal classes and then training in polite conversation and how to use public transport without having a meltdown. Schools for autistic kids usually have psychiatrists.”

“The psychiatrist at a special ed school was having sex with a fifteen-year-old with special needs?” asked Beverly, eyes still very wide.

Will nodded, “It was consensual. But then one day, in his office, when I was getting redressed, he told me with pride that he was publishing an article about me in the Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology. I didn’t want that, at all. I felt I would be naked on the page. I asked him not to, asked him to pull it. He said it was anonymized and that he wasn’t willing to take it back. I looked him, forced myself to make eye contact and said, ‘If you don’t stop this, I will.’ He laughed and said no one would believe a fifteen-year-old over him. I went straight to the principal and told her everything. She called the cops and my dad. And I kept insisting it wasn’t rape, that I had consented to everything but the paper. We called the Editor-in-Chief with the cops and my dad. The journal ripped it out so fast the rest of the journal probably caught fire from the friction. The legal and ethical ramifications were way too much for them to mess with. Then there was a trip to the hospital and a rape kit and I kept repeating that I had wanted the sex, not the paper. He lost his medical license and went to prison. I didn’t have to testify, the cops recorded me talking to them. The judge agreed not to put an autistic minor on the stand. We actually moved a couple of weeks before the trial. I don’t feel guilty about him going to prison, a thirty-one-year-old who has sex with a fifteen-year-old — regardless of how adult that teenager is — shouldn’t be working in a school filled with vulnerable, mentally impaired children. Just because I was adult enough to be consenting, doesn’t mean the next kid would have been. The worst part, to my mind, was that the Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology sent me the article and it was all wrong. We had sex for three

months and he didn't understand me at all." With a shrug he said, "The real lesson here is that, if you're going to inform someone you're screwing them over, don't do it minutes after screwing them without a condom."

"Well," said Zeller, "you won that game."

Hannibal walked in saying, "What has Will won?"

"The most interesting loss of virginity story," said Will. "What are you doing here?"

"I've worked with victims of pedophiles, Jack wanted any insight I had. I stopped by your house, let the dogs out and fed them," he said with a small smile.

"Thank you, that's really kind," said Will.

"You should be careful, Dr. Lecter," said Brian. "Will had a psychiatrist sent to prison once when he was a kid."

Hannibal raised an eyebrow. Will smiled and said, "Don't try to publish an article about me."

"No psychiatrist should write about you," said Hannibal. "I thought once I might be able too, but then I would have anonymized it and published posthumously. Neither you nor I would have seen it in ink. However, your mind is fascinating but it's a neurological quirk that makes it interesting, not a psychological one. A neurologist could write quite an intriguing study. I've seen your fMRIs, everyone in the medical community would be interested in you. But, a psychiatrist has the same amount of authority to discuss your mind as an ear, nose and throat doctor — we might all work in that physical area but neither a psychiatrist nor an ENT knows anything about your brain. Besides, anyone who knows you, knows you value your privacy. Where is Jack? He said he had specific questions for me."

"Meeting," said Will.

"Ah," said Hannibal. "How does the game work? I might as well play while I wait for Jack."

"The ages of both people, the circumstances and the fallout," Will explained.

"So the psychiatrist who tried to publish the paper?" asked Hannibal and Will nodded. "That would explain prison and not just the loss of his license. I was eighteen and she was twenty-six."

"You're oh for two," said Will, "You weren't the youngest or the oldest and I had a sixteen year age gap," said Will, smiling at him and enjoying it. It was good to see the man after the Ripper had ruined his afternoon.

"She was my aunt," said Hannibal.

Zeller said, "Whoa."

With a smirk, Hannibal continued, "It wasn't truly salacious, she was my aunt by marriage. My uncle was ten years younger than my father and ten years older than his wife. I went to

live with them when I was sixteen. I admired my uncle and aunt. I had missed family after my own had died. I loved living with my uncle and aunt. My uncle was hit by a car and died when I was eighteen. I look a great deal like my uncle, my aunt was distraught over her loss and I was shocked with grief. I had found another family and it had disappeared. I adored them and our new family fell apart. She and I spent a night together and in the morning she said it was a terrible mistake. She missed him and I looked like him. I was emotionally very young. She broke my heart. I loved her, she was the only family I had left and she betrayed the love I had for her. She never should have taken me to her bed. Two days later I heard from Johns Hopkins that I had been accepted to their internship program. I left France and I never spoke to her again."

"The aunt who liked Otello?" asked Will and Hannibal nodded. He thought of what the man had said, that one night with one woman had destroyed his ability to trust for twelve years. He thought of Hannibal telling him that he'd been mute when he'd gone to live with his aunt and uncle. Hannibal had been a hurt, damaged kid and she had made things worse.

"Wow," said Beverly. "That's as sad as Will's is funny."

"Yeah," agreed Zeller. "You just tied for first place having never played a lab game before."

Will search ended and he said, "There is an orphanage connected to the monastery but no whiff of child molestation. I'm finished. That's everything I've got." He stood and reached for his jacket. "Tell Jack I'm out for the night." He wanted to skip out while Hannibal was there. Hannibal wouldn't let Jack call him back.

"Will, I left you a gift in your kitchen when I let the dogs out. May I come over for a cup of coffee when I'm done here?" asked Hannibal.

"Yeah, sounds good to me. Can I open the gift?"

"It's not wrapped. Don't be too excited," said Hannibal. "But I intended it as a project to share."

Will nodded, "Okay, see you in a couple of hours: I'm going to go eat a frozen burrito."

"Disgusting," said Hannibal.

Will just smiled. He saw that Jimmy and Zeller exchange shocked looks. They appeared genuinely surprised that Will had a friend. Will walked home and played with the dogs for a little while before zapping a burrito. In the kitchen he saw the paint cans and wood stain on the counter. The colors for the bedroom, the office and Abigail's room were all there. It made Will smile. There were tarps, pans, rollers, brushes and masking tape. After ate his burrito, and brushed his teeth, he went upstairs. He taped off the ceiling and woodwork to make it easier for them. He pinned the tarps into the corners of the room.

"I'm home," Hannibal called from downstairs.

Will came down the stairs and smiled at him, "Thank you for the paint, Hannibal."

“You are welcome, Will,” Hannibal came to him and kissed him so slowly.

“That body… crucifixion… I’m glad we’re home,” Will pulled Hannibal into a close hug. “Did you eat?”

“I had bear stir-fry before Jack called,” said Hannibal. He stroked Will’s back slowly. “I wish the Ripper’s actions didn’t hurt you so badly. I know you have to interact with him, because of the FBI, but you have no idea how badly I wish I could keep you and the Ripper’s actions separate. How are you?”

Will breathed in the scent of Hannibal and said, “I don’t know if I’ll be able to sleep… that legless man.”

“Let’s make coffee and paint the upstairs room with primer,” said Hannibal.

“Thank you,” said Will. “I need to breathe first.”

Hannibal nodded. “You breathe; I’ll make the coffee and change.”

“Thank you,” said Will.

“Never thank me for respecting your health.” Will settled down on the couch and did the breathing that Mort had called progressive relaxation. He slowly tensed and relaxed every voluntary muscle in his body, working from his toes to his forehead and back down again. He went into his bedroom and put on ratty jeans he’d owned since college and a t-shirt that was covered in holes. In the kitchen, he kissed Hannibal. “Any better?” asked the man as he poured Will a cup of coffee.

“A little, I feel physically a little bit better. I feel like an oiled cog in the machine. I don’t physically hurt; but I’m not okay with my place in life.” He looked Hannibal up and down as he sipped his coffee. “You’re in painter’s coveralls.”

“You should be too,” said Hannibal.

Shrugging, Will said, “I’m good.” He took another long sip. “Let’s do this?”

“Yes,” agreed Hannibal. They gathered their tools up and brought it upstairs. Looking at the tarps, Hannibal said, “You laid these so well, you could murder someone up here and not get a single drop of blood on the floor. As someone who knows about these things, I’m impressed.” Will laughed.

They worked together, moving around each other. They were both covered in patches of primer. Some even dripped off the ceiling. Slowly, Will relaxed. They laughed, they kissed and when all eight walls, and both ceiling were primed they went downstairs, turned their clothes inside out and got into the shower together. They made out and Hannibal washed Will’s hair, working out paint while Will gently rubbed paint off Hannibal’s neck and cheeks.

Kissing Hannibal slowly Will said, “I’ve never been so comfortable with anyone in my life.”

Hannibal kissed him slowly, “Will, may I say something?” Will nodded. “I love you, Will. Painting a room with you, washing paint off with you, sitting with you doing nothing, walking the dogs with you — it’s all perfect. When I’m with you, I’m happy.”

Will kissed him slowly, “I love you too.” He smiled, so wide his face almost hurt. Hannibal pulled him close as they made out. “I love you too,” he repeated. He turned off the water and said, “Bed.”

Hannibal shook his head. “I’ll rinse the coffee pot, you let the dogs out.” He smiled, “Imagine if you had actual children, we’d never get to bed.” Will laughed and toweled, he and Hannibal kissed. He wrapped his towel around his waist and stepped into his flip-flops. Opening the door, he whistled for the dogs and sat down on swing in his towel. Hannibal came out, naked and said, “It’s a warm night. Why wear a towel?”

“Because we’re outside,” said Will.

“You own sixty-two acres,” said Hannibal, “mostly in the woods. I’m enjoying being naked.” He sat down next to Will. “Beautiful night.” Looking Hannibal up and down, Will unwrapped his towel and leaned forward to kiss Hannibal. Will dropped the towel to the floor as he moved to kneel in front of Hannibal. “The view just got better.” Hannibal started to message Will’s shoulders.

Will stroked and licked and kissed Hannibal to hardness. Hannibal stroked his hair. “You taste good,” Will said, “I want this and then I want to go to bed.”

“Whatever you want, Will, you feel so good,” he liked the way Hannibal played with his hair. It felt warm, intimate. With Hannibal, Will felt safe, cared for and happy. This was one of the very few places in his life where he was truly content.

“I want this, I’m tired, I’m drained, I’m a bath without a plug, it’s all just washing away. There’s no permanence. I want to slow down, be still with you, taste you and go to sleep.” He licked and sucked, taking Hannibal in to deep throat him while Hannibal moaned low, a mix of his name and some wordless plea.

“Good at that,” moaned Hannibal. Will knew it was true, knew that this was the one thing he was always good at no matter who he was with. He used one hand to message Hannibal’s hip and the other to play with his testicles. He felt like what the breathing and painting had started, the weight of the man in his mouth completed. He knew exactly who was. It was sometime around one in the morning, he was in Wolf Trap, Virginia and is name was Will Graham. One of the dogs bumped into him and Hannibal made the same reprimanding noise Will always did. Whoever it was left his side and, a few beats later, Hannibal came with a groan. Will slowly pulled away and then stood, hands on Hannibal’s knees, leaning forward to kiss the man.

“Bed?” asked Will. He wasn’t hard and he saw Hannibal watching him. “The reason I’m good about blowjobs because they’re all about control. This wasn’t about sex or lust for me. It was about safety, comfort. This was about intimacy and affection.” He kissed Hannibal again. “I’m so happy you’re here with me.”

Hannibal stroked his cheek, “I’m happy to be here with you.” He kissed Will, gently, still playing with his hair. “Bed,” he agreed.

In bed he breathed slowly, examining the day. After a little while he said. “I missed class and the Chesapeake Ripper scares me but I’m in a healthy romantic relationship for the first time in my life.”

“I love you,” said Hannibal, “I’m sorry it was a bad day.”

“I love you too,” Will said, curling into the man and drifting off.

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